

Iowa Farm Bureau Spokesman

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Preserving the hills

Bob Romeo, a Harrison County Farm Bureau member, has donated 750 acres of his farmland to save part of the Loess Hills of western Iowa. He gave a conservation easement to the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation. Under terms of the easement, Romeo forfeits his right, and

the rights of future owners of the land, to develop 159 potential building sites and for farming purposes. He may continue farming and graze a portion of the farm and may develop 13 building lots, if he chooses. See story inside.

Farmer donates conservation easement in Loess Hills

By Carol Andersen

A one-time city boy who considers the rolling farmland and timbered slopes along Iowa's western border "spiritual" has taken an unusual step to save several hundred acres in those hills from development.

Bob Romeo, president of Rocking R Farms, Inc. near Crescent, Iowa, has donated a 750-acre conservation easement to the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation. Under the terms of the easement, Romeo maintains the right to continue farming 400 acres and graze horses, retains 13 building lots and continues to have private access to and use of the property.

But he gave up his right, and the rights of future owners of the land, to develop the remaining 159 potential building sites on the property, to graze or till some 100 acres of remnant prairie and forest land, to build hog confinements or other commercial livestock facilities, to mine or sell soil for fill dirt or engage in other activities that would damage the natural and cultural resources of the property.

The land lies along Interstate 680 in Harrison and Pottawattamie counties, "ear a scenic overlook in the middle of the state's beloved Loess Hills.

Some of his neighbors called him crazy for forfeiting future potential sales of land that could easily have brought more than \$4 million in profit.

But that's not how Bob Romeo's mind works.

"I grew up in Omaha and I used to make a lot of trips to Des Moines, and I would always pass



PHOTO BY TIM MILLS

Whenever Bob Romeo, a Harrison County Farm Bureau member, purchases land, he works with local conservationists to outline conservation measures for the erosion-prone soils of the Loess Hills.

by this little farm. One day I noticed a sale sign, and I made a call. They were asking for sealed bids, I placed one and mine was the successful one."

Never farmed before

Romeo, who had "ever touched a piece of farm equipment, let alone planted or harvested a crop of any kind, found himself the owner of a 50-acre farm.

"I called up the local conservation office, looking for whatever help I could find, and Bill Hammitt (former district commissioner with the Pottawattamie County Soil and Water Conservation District) came out," Romeo says. "He showed me a fence on the property that was within a few inches of being completely covered by soil. 'That's erosion,' he told me. Coming from the city, I had no

idea what erosion looked like."

Hammitt worked with Romeo to develop a farming plan that incorporated conservation practices. He mapped out locations for terraces, waterways and darn structures to hold the soil in place.

Eventually, Romeo expanded his farm to 750 contiguous acres — the same acres he donated to the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation last month as a conservation easement, plus another 300-400 acres.

"Whenever I bought a piece of ground, I always got with my local soil conservation service to plan out conservation measures," Romeo notes.

About 15 years ago, he became acquainted with Tim Sproul of the Harrison County Conservation Board. "Tim came out to the farm and said, 'Have you ever given any thought to making improve-

ments to your prairie?'" Romeo recalls. "I thought it was just scrub and brush, but he showed me the parts of my land that were virgin prairie and said if I would start burning them off regularly, I'd be amazed at how they'd come back."

More than 50 species of plants indigenous to Iowa have been identified on Romeo's land, including a rare stand of prickly pear cactus.

When Sproul began talking to him about a permanent conservation easement, Romeo listened.

Urban sprawl threatens

"In the Loess Hills, one of the biggest issues we face is urban sprawl. There's farmland out here that once sold for \$250 an acre and now it's worth \$11,000 a acre. That's hard to pass up," he admits. "But here's a way to protect the land without selling it, and I still retain the right to farm it the way I'm already farming it, to develop or sell a few of the building sites and live on it as long as I want:

Romeo understands the attraction the Loess Hills hold for urban residents seeking rural refuges.

"I shared that dream. I wanted it, too, but there needs to be some balance. Conservation easements are a way to blend conservation practices with development opportunities.

"When the surveyor showed me how my farm could be divided into 159 lots for homes, I knew in my heart I never wanted to see that happen to this land," Romeo says. --

"This project really demon-

strates the flexibility of conservation easements," notes Mark Ackelson, president of the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation. "Many people mistakenly assume that donating an easement means opening your land for public use or giving up the right to farm. In truth, landowners choose which rights to give up and which to retain."

Sproul agrees. "We can't own all land publicly, and I don't believe we should. Easements are a way we can work with landowners to protect conservation interests on private land — and that's good for everyone. Though the land is still privately owned, all citizens benefit from protected open space for scenery, wildlife and native plants."

Romeo gives great credit to Sproul and Hammitt. "These are unsung heroes who spent a lot of time walking around my land with me, figuring out how to preserve and protect it," he says. "It would tickle me if someone else reads about this and wants to do the same thing with their land.

"I think the Loess Hills are a very spiritual place. When I go into these hills and gaze out over the land, I actually go back in time in my mind. I imagine what I would have seen 200 years ago, what the river looked like, how the Indians lived here. I hope the legacy of this conservation easement is that my great-great-grandchildren can sit in these same hills 100 years from now and imagine how their great-great-granddad lived and famed."

For more information on conservation easements, contact the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation at 800-475-1846 or www.inhf.org.